



Helena Forde, del. et lith.

THE COMMON OPOSSUM.
(*PHALANGISTA VULPINA.*)

Sydney, N. S. W.—Thomas Richards, Government Printer.—1869.

From a Photograph from life, by Victor A. Provost.

Vulpine Phalanger.

(PHALANGISTA VULPINA.)

THE subject of our present illustration is the most common and widely-distributed of Australian animals. It is classed with the Phalanger family, having the peculiar attributes of the tribe, namely, hind feet with a prehensile thumb, and two small inner toes, united by a membrane. The fore-feet are provided with the usual five strongly-clawed toes. The teeth differ constantly—the small ones at least between incisors and molars. The permanent set consists of three incisors, a canine, two premolars, and four molars, in the upper jaw; and one incisor, a very small tubercular canine, a premolar, and four molars, in the lower. In describing the dentition, the incisors, front, or cutting teeth of both sides are enumerated together; while the other teeth *in each ramus* are given separately. The usual way of expressing the dental formula in this case would be—Incisors $\frac{6}{2}$, canines $\frac{1-1}{1-1}$, premolars $\frac{2-2}{1-1}$, molars $\frac{4-4}{4-4} = 34$. We stated that the teeth differ considerably in various specimens; because some retain the small premolars, and others shed or absorb them; their proper number would be $\frac{3-3}{3-3}$ above and below. In the majority of animals the dentition is, however, as above; two premolars in each ramus of the upper, and one premolar in each ramus of the lower jaw. In order to test the correctness of our supposition that the number of premolars in each ramus really amounted to three, we obtained more than 100 skulls, but amongst them only two were found with perfect dentition.

The colouration of the Vulpine Phalanger is as follows:—Fur long and woolly; ashy-grey, under-parts of body yellowish; muzzle and chin blackish; ears nearly naked on the inner side, well covered externally, except at the tip; a black patch at the base of the ear; feet yellowish, more or less suffused with brown. Old males have a rusty-coloured neck and breast; tail bushy, black towards the apex, prehensile; and one-third of it naked beneath; eyes rather large, brown, with rounded pupil. Female with a well-developed pouch, four teats, seldom bearing more than one or two young at a time.

Numerous varieties of the common Phalanger exist in every part of Australia, from the far north to the islands of Bass's Straits and Tasmania; the black variety, with long ears, is peculiar to this island. In New Holland, or Australia proper, we find a Phalanger of a grey or black colour, and with shorter ears—in particular in the Clarence District—which has been described as a distinct species, under the name of *Phalangista canina*. A third variety occurs near the sea-coast, in thick stunted scrub about Port Hacking principally; the colour is sandy, and the tail less hairy than that of the species under review. This animal is said to inhabit the scrub only, and not to ascend trees.* It is captured by hunting with dogs, which drive it from the shelter of the thick brushwood where it passes the day, and it is thus secured without difficulty.

How far northward this variety is to be found we are unable to say. A few specimens in the Museum came from the neighbourhood of Port Denison, and were caught in localities similar to those which the animal frequents at Port Hacking. It is possible also that the Phalangers that inhabit the Mallee-scrub are different from those which frequent high trees; the aborigines appear to think so, but in the absence of specimens we are unable to decide the question.

Settlers complain a great deal of the ravages of the Phalangers, and the increase is accounted for because their greatest enemies—the aboriginal natives—die off. Their food is varied; it consists of leaves, fruit, grass, and flesh. We have frequently observed them gnawing bones; and when they can get a small bird, or a nestful of eggs, they are not slow to take advantage thereof.

The day is generally passed in a hollow branch; only the Ring-tailed Phalanger constructs a sort of covered nest for its habitation.

Our figure, which represents the animal well in a natural position, is taken from a very tame half-grown specimen in the possession of the Hon. Henry Parkes, M.L.A.

* For a very good reason—because there are none.